New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12038

A Note on John Milbank and Thomas Aquinas

Matthew Levering

Abstract

The emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of a renewed Thomistic moral theology showed that the same could and should be attempted in dogmatic theology, with full weight given to the biblical, patristic, and spiritual emphases of the Ressourcement movement

Keywords

Aquinas, Milbank, Ressourcement movement, de Lubac, creation

The emergence in the 1980s and 1990s of a renewed Thomistic moral theology showed that the same could and should be attempted in dogmatic theology, with full weight given to the biblical, patristic, and spiritual emphases of the *Ressourcement* movement. What might be called "*Ressourcement* Thomism," then, invites theologians to read with sympathy the Christian theological tradition (and to read interreligiously as well) and to learn from a realist and participatory metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, and philosophy of nature.[1] Although the theologians of the *Ressourcement* movement were sometimes too critical of the Baroque period, due largely to concerns regarding predestination and to a tendency toward universalism, they were exemplary in their consideration of the entire theological tradition and in their devotion to Christ and the Church rather than to the academy.

From this perspective, the present "note" engages sympathetically and critically with John Milbank's *The Suspended Middle*. In offering this brief note, I am following other Catholic theologians who have voiced concerns about (along with appreciations of) Milbank's approach.[2] That these concerns come from a variety of perspectives

[1] Cf. *Ressourcement Thomism: Sacred Doctrine, the Sacraments, and the Moral Life*, ed. Reinhard Hütter and Matthew Levering (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

[2] See, for example, Edward T. Oakes, S.J., "The Paradox of Nature and Grace: On John Milbank's *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural*," *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 667–95, especially 676–95; Reinhard Hütter,

© 2014 The Dominican Council. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2014, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indicates that the divisions among Catholic theologians who share a commitment to the teachings of the Church are less wide than is sometimes supposed.[3]

Central Elements of John Milbank's The Suspended Middle

Drawing upon the research of Jacob Schmutz, who shows how the united movement of God and the free creature (on distinct levels) developed in the late-medieval and Baroque periods into a separation between the creature's free action and an extrinsic concurrence or general influence of God, John Milbank argues for "gift without contrast."[4] As Milbank sees it, the problem with later Thomistic (and, even more so, Scotistic) accounts of nature/grace, and thus of divine governance, consists in an extrinsicism that pits God's action against what is "proper" to creaturely action (nature).

Granting the radical ontological difference between God and creatures—analogy rather than univocity—Milbank critiques, with François Laruelle, "the supposed discovery of fixed general *conditioning* circumstances within which the conditioned must operate."[5] When one understands the created order or nature as "fixed general *conditioning* circumstances" in which grace must operate,

"*Desiderium Naturale Visionis Dei—Est autem duplex hominis beatitudo sive felicitas*: Some Observations about Lawrence Feingold's and John Milbank's Recent Interventions in the Debate over the Natural Desire to See God," *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 81–131, especially 89–96; Nicholas J. Healy, III, "Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate," *Communio* 35 (2008): 535–64, at 551–52. See also Michael M. Waddell, "Faith and Reason in the Wake of Milbank and Pickstock," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 48 (2008): 381–96. The current debate about nature and grace is much more extensive, of course, than is debate about Milbank's view in particular.

[3] Cf. John Milbank, "The New Divide: Romantic versus Classical Orthodoxy," *Modern Theology* 26 (2010): 26–38.

[4] See John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 96, 97, 108. For highly problematic late-medieval and Baroque understandings of God and the creature as concurring partial causes, see Jacob Schmutz, "La doctrine médiévale des causes et la théologie de la nature pure (XIIIe-XVIIe siècles)," *Revue Thomiste* 101 (2001): 217–64; André de Muralt, "La causalité aristotélicienne et la structure de pensée scotiste," *Dialectica* 47 (1993): 121–41, especially 135–36 on Scotus and Ockham and 137–39 on Calvin's reaction. As Milbank points out, Schmutz identifies Bonaventure's position as already problematic. Schmutz's essay appears in a symposium that has been published in English as *Surnaturel: A Controversy at the Heart of Twentieth-Century Thomistic Thought*, ed. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., trans. Robert Williams (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press, 2009).

[5] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 95; he cites François Laruelle, *Principes de la Non-philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1996) and Laruelle's "Qu'est ce que la non-philosophie?" in *Initiation à le Pensée de François Laruelle*, ed. Juan Diego Blanco (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 13–69.

© 2014 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

then in Milbank's view a strict separation of God from his creation emerges, so that an "ontological contract" between God and creatures replaces "ontological gift-exchange."[6] Creatures become autonomous agents whose properties are the "contractual" foundations of the extrinsic gift of grace. In other words, the gift of grace must conform to creatures' autonomous structure, as if God's activity in creating and sustaining being was unrelated to his bestowal of grace, and as if God's grace could only impact the created order in an extrinsic fashion according to which the created order is determinative.

By contrast to such a view of the created order as a closed system, radically disjoined from God's extrinsic gift of grace, Milbank suggests that Henri de Lubac's *Surnaturel* (in its original 1946 edition) recovers both the unity of divine action in creatures and the priority of divine gifting over against notions of autonomous created structures. According to Milbank, de Lubac succeeds in returning Catholic theology and philosophy to the standpoint of the Fathers and high medievals, and in addressing the concern raised more recently by postmodern philosophy. With reference to Claude Bruaire's metaphysics of gift, Milbank describes de Lubac's insight: "The divine gift descending exceeds conditioning/conditioned specularity, just as the aspiring *élan* to the supernatural exceeds the contractual reciprocity of immanent being and opens to view a 'non-ontology', or what Claude Bruaire calls an 'ontodology'."[7] The key is the overcoming of the "contrast" that pits the gift of creation against the gift of grace. The "divine gift descending" (grace) cannot be limited by the conditions imposed by the gift of creation, and neither can the gift of creation be understood in "contractual" terms as if it were not already caught up, as ascending spirit, in the gift-exchange accomplished in and through the "divine gift descending." In short, the gift of creation and the gift of grace are already united in the one divine gifting. In both gifts, one finds the relation to the Giver and the superabundance, the exceeding of every limit, of divine gifting.

When Milbank turns to apply this view to Aquinas's doctrine of the divine governance, he notes that for Aquinas created self-governing spirit is never autonomous, but always "is *also* directly governed by something trans-cosmic and supernatural."[8] From this he

[6] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 94.

[7] Ibid., 96; cf. David Grummett, "Eucharist, Matter and the Supernatural: Why de Lubac Needs Teilhard," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008): 165–78; Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., "Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 3–18. For further discussion of Bruaire, see Antonio López, F.S.C.B., *Spirit's Gift: The Metaphysical Insight of Claude Bruaire* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

[8] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 99.

© 2014 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

concludes that to describe created self-governing spirit as "merely natural" would be a mistake, because it would give the wrong sense of God's governance. Likewise, Milbank notes, "Aquinas indicates that the providential mode of dealing with spiritual creatures ultimately includes grace, since such creatures attain the 'ultimate end' of knowing and loving God."[9] Milbank makes much of the fact that Aquinas never imagines the cosmos without its governing intellect: "Cosmos requires the government of spirit; spirit is destined to be engraced; therefore in one sense every creature is already for and by grace. After all, how *could charis* be a less original or plenitudinous gift than *esse*?"[10] In addition to this sense in which "every creature is already for and by grace," he argues that Aquinas's analogies for an ultimate end that we cannot attain by our own resources alone—analogies such as the oceans' tidal flow being both "natural" and due to the moon—suggest that grace gives created nature "something of what is proper" to created nature.[11] On this view, "things are 'properly' raised above themselves to a new potential" as opposed to being locked into, by their own created properties, a fulfillment defined by the original potential.

The central point is that created nature is such that its fulfilling itself (ultimate end) through exceeding of its own limitations is "natural" rather than unnatural, as it would be on a strictly Aristotelian view. Created nature finds itself within what Milbank calls God's "'art of spirit-governing,'" so that the gift of grace cannot in any way be set in opposition to the gift of created nature: God's art is his gifting, "gift without contrast."[12] Indeed, Milbank reasons that "[s]ince God alone governs our freedom and really turns our freedom towards him, freedom itself is here seen by Aquinas as the natural desire for the supernatural and even as obedience to grace. The gift of supernatural destiny *is* freedom, and it is the gift of our power to shape ourselves with true artistry."[13] But does the gift of grace, bringing about our true artistry, thus become individualistic? For Aquinas, Milbank observes, the answer is no, because graced action occurs within a human community constituted in and through the mediation, the communication, of divine gift: "Aquinas puts this supernatural *poesis* in the context of supernatural community: what we do through the influence of a friend we still do properly for ourselves."[14] Nature does not "contractually" limit the freedom that

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 100.
[11] Ibid., 101. Milbank cites *Summa contra Gentiles* III, ch. 147 and *In Rom*., ch. 11, lect. 3.
[12] Ibid., 100.
[13] Ibid., 102.
[14] Ibid.

© 2014 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is divine-human "gift-exchange," a unified movement of gifting in which the two gifts (nature and grace) flow into each other rather than either being extrinsic to the other. Freedom is this communion of gifting that breaks down barriers, a communion in which we find created spirit's ultimate end: deification. In this freedom of "gift-exchange," we discover divine governance as deification.

Thomas Aquinas's Theology

Can created powers be accurately described without adverting to their graced finality? If human "freedom" is "the natural desire for the supernatural" (that is, for deifying union with the Trinity), then the answer would be that human freedom cannot be described without reference to grace. Consider, however, Aquinas's account of how God moves the soul's powers. Aquinas emphasizes both that God is the giver of the soul's powers, and that God is profoundly interior—as efficient, formal, and final cause—to every mode of created rationality, including volition. Even so, he argues that not every mode of created rationality need be a graced mode. Were every mode a graced mode, in fact, the full plenitude of our participation in God's goodness (and of our teleological movement toward God) would be difficult to appreciate.

Aquinas observes that the intellect can be moved as regards either its potential to understand or its active understanding, and God moves the intellect in both ways.[15] As the cause of all created intellectual power, God moves every created intellect as regards its potential to understand. God also "impresses on the created intellect the intelligible species,"[16] not as though the agent intellect did not derive the intelligible species, but rather because the derivation of the intelligible species requires that its intelligibility be grounded in divine Truth. As Aquinas puts it, "For as the intelligible types of everything exist first of all in God, and are derived from Him by other intellects in order that these may actually understand; so also are they derived by creatures that they may subsist."[17]

This interiority of God in the act of knowing describes the natural act of knowing, not yet the graced or glorified act—although this

[15] I, q. 105, a. 3.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid. Aquinas explains that he does not thereby give the created intellect a merely passive role: "The intellectual operation is performed by the intellect in which it exists, as by a secondary cause; but it proceeds from God as from its first cause" (ad 1). Likewise he notes, "The intellectual light together with the likeness of the thing understood is a sufficient principle of understanding; but it is a secondary principle, and depends upon the First Principle" (ad 2).

© 2014 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

distinction is not a separation, because the finality of deification applies in any case. As Aquinas emphasizes, "the likenesses which God impresses on the created intellect are not sufficient to enable the created intellect to understand Him through His essence."[18] God's presence in our natural act of knowing does not enable the created intellect, striving to know God, to apprehend him as he is. By contrast, the interiority of God in glorified knowing, Aquinas affirms, is such that we actually know not by "any created similitude" but by "the light of glory strengthening the intellect to see God,"[19] such that not a mere concept but "the divine essence is united to the created intellect, as the object actually understood, making the intellect in act by and of itself."[20]

What about graced knowing that is not yet the vision of God? In this regard, Aquinas explains that "[t]he light of faith makes us see what we believe,"[21] so that we can believe God revealing and thereby can be prepared for the vision of God.[22] This interior illumination elevates our natural mode of knowing, and it also works through our natural mode of knowing. Indeed, prior to the state of glory, graced knowing consists in faith because of the limitations of our natural mode of knowing: "Now man acquires a share of this learning, not indeed all at once, but by little and little, according to the mode of his nature: and every one who learns thus must needs believe, in order that he may acquire science in a perfect degree."[23] Aquinas thus makes clear that God's governance includes distinct modes of God's interiority in our knowing, so as to guide us to our "ultimate happiness" of "a supernatural vision of God."[24]

Aquinas identifies the same intimacy of God in our rational acts when he turns to the question of whether God moves the created will. Aquinas observes three ways in which God moves the will. First, as final cause, God moves the will by attraction, since God is infinite Good and the will (as a rational dynamism) seeks good. All finite goodness is a created participation in God's infinite goodness, and so whenever the human will embraces particular instantiations of finite goodness, the will does so as attracted or moved by God. Does it then make sense to speak of a rational will that lacks grace (though not the graced finality)? Yes, because even the will that lacks grace is moved by God and because the human will chooses between

[18] I, q. 105, a. 3, ad 3.
[19] I, q. 12, a. 2.
[20] I, q. 12, a. 2, ad 3.
[21] II-II, q. 1, a. 4, ad 3.
[22] II-II, q. 2, a. 3; cf. I, q. 1, a. 1.
[23] II-II, q. 2, a. 3.
[24] Ibid.

© 2014 The Dominican Council
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular finite goods rather than encountering directly the infinite divine goodness.

Second, God moves the will not only by attracting it but also by causing it to be. God creates the human will as an inclination toward the good, not as a mere neutral mechanism for choosing. In this way God moves the will, because the will, as a created dynamism toward the good, has a natural motion or "interior inclination" that is from God. Precisely in being what it is, the will displays that its motion is from God. Does this natural motion already contain charity within it? Insisting upon diverse modes of inclination toward God, Aquinas argues that "not every love has the character of friendship" and that friendship between humans and God involves not solely the natural inclination of the will but a communication or fellowship that we receive in Christ Jesus.[25] Citing Romans 5:5 and 6:23, Aquinas emphasizes that "charity can be in us neither naturally, nor through acquisition by the natural powers, but by the infusion of the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father and the Son, and the participation of whom in us is created charity."[26]

Third, God works in and through created agents by "giving the form which is the principle of action" and by preserving this form in being.[27] Even more than the end and the efficient cause of the action, the form by which the created agent acts is most interior to the agent. By our rational "form" we are able to perform the acts by which we, as rational creatures, uniquely participate in God's governance (and thus return to God). On this basis Aquinas concludes that God's intimacy in the action of his creatures is inexpressibly rich: "since the form of a thing is within the thing, and all the more, as it approaches nearer to the First and Universal Cause [as does the *imago dei*]; and because in all things God Himself is properly the cause of universal being which is innermost in all things; it follows that in all things God works intimately."[28] In his treatment of grace Aquinas explores the relationship between the natural form of the soul and the graced form. He notes that "because grace is above human nature, it cannot be a substance or a substantial form," because then the graced soul would no longer be soul.[29] As a mode of "participation of the divine goodness," grace qualifies the soul as an "accidental form."[30] Just as God provides the natural forms and powers of creatures as the principles of the acts by which creatures move toward their good

[25] II-II, q. 23, a. 1. Cf. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., "'Nature and Grace' in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*," trans. Shannon Gaffney, *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 231–48.

[26] II-II, q. 24, a. 2.

[27] I, q. 105, a. 5.

[28] Ibid.

[29] I-II, q. 110, a. 2, ad 2.

[30] Ibid.

© 2014 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(and thus toward God), so also does God "infuse into such as He moves towards the acquisition of supernatural good, certain forms or supernatural qualities, whereby they may be moved by Him sweetly and promptly to acquire eternal good."[31]

Does the natural form of human beings constrict God's gifting, by setting limits? Aquinas notes that humans do not receive the gifts of grace in proportion to the strength of their natural intellectual gifts.[32] Although their natural gifts are far less than those of the angels, for example, humans can be united even with the highest angels, who participate most fully in the Holy Spirit's "fire of love."[33] Grace, as Aquinas says, "depends on the liberality of God, and not on the order of nature."[34] Because human agency is rational agency, and because the ordering of God's rational creatures depends upon charity, the gifts of nature do not determine the apportioning of the gifts of grace. Citing 1 Corinthians 12:11, "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills," Aquinas observes that "charity is given, not according to our natural capacity, but according as the Spirit wills to distribute His gifts."[35] This does not mean that natural capacities have no value in the work of God's governance. Divine governance proceeds through the agency of free creatures, and this agency differs in important ways according to nature, as for example in the distinctions between the kinds of angels, and between angels and humans, which result in different roles in the history of salvation.

Concluding Reflections

The goal of Milbank's formulations is to recover the unity of God's governance as God's gifting in the creature, and to deny that this gifting occurs in an extrinsic fashion, as if God worked alongside the creature rather than exercising a profoundly interior operation. Milbank fears that the attempt to view created powers outside their entire teleological framework—the framework in which all that they possess, they possess for deification—results in an extrinsicism that

[31] I-II, q. 110, a. 2.

[32] See I, q. 108, a. 4; cf. q. 108, a. 7.

[33] I, q. 108, aa. 6 and 8. See Dempsey, "Providence, Distributive Justice, and Divine Government in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas," 381–82.

[34] I, q. 108, a. 8. See also, regarding the fallen angels, I, q. 109, aa. 3 and 4. For an overview of Aquinas's theology of angels in light of biblical and patristic teaching, see Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., *Les anges et les démons* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 15–71.

[35] II-II, q. 24, a. 3, *sed contra*. Aquinas explains that "the quantity of charity depends neither on the condition of nature nor on the capacity of natural virtue, but only on the will of the Holy Spirit" (II-II, q. 24, a. 3).

© 2014 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fails to understand what "created" means. In creating the rational creature, God does not build an edifice that then constrains God as God seeks to add grace to it. Rather, God's gifting exhibits a profound unity: the rational creature is made in and for graced union with God the Trinity.[36]

But there are problems with some of Milbank's stronger formulations about "gift without contrast," "in which the determining would only be posited along with the determined," so that "there is no spiritual existence without grace" and so that grace gives the rational creature "something of what is proper to it."[37] Notably, Milbank equates our spiritual power ("freedom," "the gift of our power to shape ourselves with true artistry") with "[t]he gift of supernatural destiny."[38] Here the value of distinguishing between created and graced participations in God's goodness needs reasserting, despite the fact that both have the gifting God as their source. For example, if "spiritual existence" requires grace, then what happens after, in Aquinas's words, "the loss of grace dissolved the obedience of the flesh to the soul"?[39] Does our "spiritual existence" entirely dissolve when by mortal sin we fall from the state of grace? Along the same lines, if "the determining would only be posited along with the determined," what happens when "the determined" experiences the loss of "the determining" (grace)? Does the fallen human person thereby fall into radical indetermination, and if so, how could such a person remain human in a meaningful way?

Perhaps Milbank simply means to underscore the teleological finality of deification, a finality that cannot be lost. If this were all that he meant, however, then the value of the distinction (not separation) between capacities as created and as graced would be all the more evident. This distinction serves to make clear that the loss of grace does not—and herein lies the paradox of grace—destroy the graced teleology of the rational creature.

Similarly, if the loss of grace deprives the rational creature of "something which is proper to it," then mortal sin would destroy properties of the human person that make us human. The loss of grace (though not of the teleological finality of deification) by original sin, or by any mortal sin, would constitute a dehumanizing that makes such a person in a certain sense subhuman, lacking the qualities that make us human. Placing to the side the difficulties posed by this relegation of some persons to a subhuman level, it is important to note that deification here becomes describable simply as re-humanization,

[36] Cf. I, q. 95, a. 1; II-II, q. 5, a. 1.

[37] Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 96, 98, 101.

[38] Ibid., 102.

[39] I, q. 95, a. 1. Romanus Cessario, O.P. makes this point in his "Cardinal Cajetan and His Critics," *Nova et Vetera* 3 (2005): 109–18, at 117.

© 2014 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rather than as a transformation in Jesus Christ that is freely given to us by the Holy Spirit and that takes us infinitely beyond what would have been possible for us on the basis of our own intrinsic resources.

What about Milbank's equation of "freedom," or "the gift of our power to shape ourselves with true artistry," with "[t]he gift of supernatural destiny"? Certainly, freedom is never neutral toward the good, and thus never neutral toward the ultimate end that God ordains for human beings, created in grace.[40] Yet, appreciation of the modes of divine governance should make us wary of the claim that the rational creature's ability to move in any way toward the good depends in an absolute sense upon God's gratuitous gift of deification.

In short, what is at stake is the full variety of modes according to which the divine governance works in and through human rational capacities. We are in Milbank's debt for his insistence, following de Lubac, on the teleological finality of deification. What I am suggesting is that the distinctions that Aquinas makes between nature and grace increase our appreciation of this teleology, as we rejoice in the diversity of modes of participation in God's goodness.

Matthew Levering
Mundelein Seminary, Illinois, United States

mjlevering@yahoo.com

[40] I, q. 95, a. 1

© 2014 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12038 Published online by Cambridge University Press